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## Local Elections, Decentralisation, and Institutional Reform

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Pakatan Harapan's (PH) 2018 election manifesto pledged to 'restore the true spirit of federalism' and 'strengthen the role of local authorities' in Malaysia. This has raised expectations for decentralisation reforms and the restoration of local elections following the coalition's unexpected win in the 2018 general election. Three major obstacles, however, have prevented immediate reform. First, proper sequencing is required to avoid exacerbating the 'missing middle' problem. Second, lack of consensus around local elections within PH makes them potentially divisive politically, particularly because of fears, whether well-founded or not, that they may exacerbate racial tensions. Third, original survey data suggest limited enthusiasm for extensive political decentralisation among PH supporters now that Barisan Nasional has been removed from power.

### Introduction

Malaysia's 14th general election (GE14) on 9 May 2018 delivered a previously all-but-unthinkable outcome: the dominant United Malays National Organisation (UMNO) and its Barisan Nasional (BN) coalition partners, which had led Malaysia since independence in 1957, were defeated at the ballot box.<sup>1</sup> The ultimate causes of this turnover will be debated at

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<sup>1</sup> The coalition was known as the Alliance prior to 1973.

length over the coming years.<sup>2</sup> There is little dispute, however, about the most immediate cause: Malaysia's Prime Minister (and UMNO president) Najib Tun Razak was widely perceived as having abused his powers and engaged in massive corruption, catalysing a backlash against the status quo.

Najib's abuses were enabled, at least in part, by the highly centralised nature of power in Malaysia, where the federal level dominates over the subnational tiers (Hutchinson, 2014; Loh, 2015) and the Prime Minister's Department has amassed immense power (Ostwald, 2017a). This power concentration precipitated long-standing calls from both civil society and opposition coalitions to redistribute power, specifically to disperse it across the tiers of government. The run-up to GE14 was no different. The manifesto of the opposition coalition, known as Pakatan Harapan (PH), clearly laid out its reform agenda, including a promise to 'Revive the true spirit of federalism' (#24) and to 'Strengthen the role and powers of the local authorities' (#25) (Pakatan Harapan, 2018). The latter promise was widely read as an intention to reinstate local elections.

Reinstating local elections – which in Malaysia are often referred to as the 'third vote' to complement existing federal- and state-level votes – would mark a return to an earlier institutional arrangement. Limited elections for local representatives were held between 1857 and 1913, then brought back in the waning days of colonial rule in 1951. For a brief period, with the exception of Kuala Lumpur, all 48 major local governments of peninsular Malaysia were controlled by local elective councils (Tennant, 1973). Local elections were again, however, suspended in 1965 against the backdrop of Konfrontasi with Indonesia, only to be removed entirely through the 1976 Local Government Act that specified local councils were to be constituted by state appointees (Shabbir Cheema and Ahmad Hussein, 1978). Unilateral attempts to re-implement local elections by the states of Penang in 2012 and Selangor shortly thereafter were blocked by federal court decisions.

The unanticipated political transition in GE14 seemed to set the stage for the rapid re-introduction of the third vote, not only because of the manifesto's promises, but also because the new governing coalition appeared to understand the theoretical advantages of empowering local governments and giving their immediate constituents the ability to hold them accountable. And yet, the first steps have been cautious, with calls for a detailed study over a three-year time frame and suggestions from

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<sup>2</sup> See Hutchinson (2018), Chin (2018), and Lemièrè (2018) for some initial accounts.

Prime Minister Mahathir Mohamad himself that local elections may be inappropriate for Malaysia. How do we explain this tenuous response?

This chapter addresses the arguments for and challenges confronting the return of local elections in Malaysia. Beyond the clear logistical questions and financial implications that must be addressed, several additional issues emerge. First is the matter of sequencing. Having had many of their competences hollowed out over decades of centralisation, Malaysia's states rely on their *de facto* control over the local tier to execute their mandates. If the local tier is made autonomous without the states being simultaneously empowered through other measures, Malaysia risks exacerbating the already serious problem of the 'missing middle', where states lack the capacity to effectively monitor and coordinate local activities.<sup>3</sup> Second is the issue of political risk. PH is a young coalition comprised of ideologically dissimilar parties. There is little consensus around the need for local elections, making it a potential wedge between the coalition's factions. The stakes are further elevated by the perceived association between local elections and racial tensions, which provides sceptics with powerful ammunition. Third is the issue of meagre popular demand, as indicated by survey findings introduced in this chapter. Shifting power away from the centre was of paramount importance for many voters while Najib wielded it. But with a new and presumably friendlier government at the helm, many of those who previously demanded power dispersion now appear comfortable with its concentration in a decisive leader they hope will quickly correct Malaysia's course. In short, bringing back local elections carries significant political risk but does not appear to offer clear pay-offs in terms of popular support. Given that, their return – and decentralisation more generally – has taken a back seat on the reform agenda, despite the sound arguments in their favour.

### **Decentralisation, Local Elections, and Malaysia**

Decentralising control of resources and other decision-making power to lower levels of government has been linked to a range of beneficial outcomes, including more rapid economic growth (Breuss and Eller, 2004), improved governance (Bardhan, 2002), and better-formulated policies (Besley and

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<sup>3</sup> The 'missing middle' problem describes states with weak or ineffective middle tiers of government that are unable to effectively bridge the central and local tiers. See Hutchinson (2017).

Coate, 2003).<sup>4</sup> The logic is simple: by virtue of their greater proximity to the populations they serve, local governments have a better understanding of local needs than the more distant central government. These informational advantages allow policy decisions to more accurately reflect unique local needs and preferences. This is especially beneficial in contexts like Malaysia's where ethnic, religious, and regional diversity expands the breadth of those local preferences and needs. In addition, citizen involvement at the local level is thought to socialise the electorate towards more active political engagement in a range of other contexts, thus generating positive spill-overs for higher tiers of government and civil society.

Separate from the informational advantages that local governments have, the benefits of decentralisation are also thought to arise through greater accountability, as – again by virtue of proximity – citizens are better able to monitor and hold accountable their local government than they are the more distant central government (Khemani, 2001). Local elections are the primary mechanism to ensure this accountability.

Malaysia's historical experience with decentralisation and local elections was driven primarily by political expediency, rather than efforts to capture gains in governance and economic development. The federal structure itself reflects this, as it is the end product of British efforts to reduce resistance to their occupation by recognising and ruling through the decentralised network of Malay monarchies that controlled the peninsula in the pre-colonial era. That structure was given legal recognition in the form of states during the colonial period, and ultimately became the foundation for the Federation of Malaya with its constitutionally recognised federal, state, and local tiers of government.

The peninsula's first institutionalised local government body appeared in the form of a 'Committee of Assessors' in Penang in 1801. The largely appointed committee, which eventually evolved into the Municipal Council, was responsible for many aspects of town planning (Athi Nahappan, 1970). In 1856, elections were introduced to partially constitute that committee, though extensive restrictions significantly conscribed both the pool of eligible candidates and electors. Those elections were gradually expanded in the Straits Settlements until their abolition in 1913 through the Municipal

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<sup>4</sup> While the theoretical benefits of decentralisation are clear, the anticipated benefits do not always materialise. See Malesky and Hutchinson (2016) for a discussion on this in the Southeast Asian context.

Ordinances Act, after which municipal committees were again constituted by appointment.

The British defeat and subsequent loss of Malaya and the Straits Settlements in WWII accelerated the march towards decolonisation. In preparation for independence, the Local Authorities Elections Ordinance of 1950 provided for the (re)introduction of elections in the peninsula, beginning at the local level. The first of these was held in Penang in 1951. Elections expanded beyond urbanised areas through the 1952 Local Councils Ordinance, which created partially or fully elected local councils in rural areas. Political expediency was again a decisive factor: the Malayan Emergency (1948–60) saw the establishment of over 550 ‘new villages’ comprised primarily of resettled Chinese squatters whose loyalties to the state were suspect; the local councils were to facilitate the integration of this population and demonstrate the virtues of democracy (Athi Nahappan, 1970). Shortly after independence in 1957, the Federation of Malaya had nearly 400 recognised local authorities, including 3 city/municipal councils, 32 town councils, 46 town boards, 7 rural district councils, and over 300 local councils.

The empowerment of local governments was short lived. The 1957 federal constitution allocated the bulk of responsibilities and resources to the federal level.<sup>5</sup> Furthermore, the Alliance’s electoral setback in 1959 – in which it barely secured a majority of the popular vote and failed to secure a large portion of sub-national governments – prompted attempts to consolidate its power through institutional restructuring. Replacing locally elected councils in opposition-leaning areas with appointees whose loyalty was assured helped to stem losses and extend leverage over the local electorate. This began in Kuala Lumpur, which was placed under direct federal control in 1960. State-level take-overs of other councils ensued in subsequent years. In addition, the 1960 creation of the National Council for Local Government provided the federal level with an institution through which it could coordinate and intervene in local government affairs. Konfrontasi with Indonesia in 1965, together with claims of malfeasance among elected local governments, ultimately provided justification for the wholesale suspension of local elections (Tennant, 1973). As Cheng (2018) summarises, ‘Abolishing elective

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<sup>5</sup> Centralisation accelerated under Mahathir’s first period as prime minister (see Hutchinson, 2014; Ostwald, 2017a). This process was so comprehensive that Francis Loh (2009: 195) called Malaysia a ‘centralized unitary system with federal features.’

local councils and replacing [them] with an appointed system was a crude but effective way of liberating federal and state governments from local councils resistant to their vision of national development.’

In announcing the suspension, Prime Minister Tunku Abdul Rahman noted that elections would be restored once the threat of Konfrontasi abated. The report of the royal commission of enquiry on local authorities in West Malaysia, published after peaceful relations between Malaysia and Indonesia were restored, affirmed the merits of reinstating local elections (Athi Nahappan, 1970). The suspension, however, remained in effect until the 1976 Local Government Act (LGA), which placed local governments firmly under the control of the state governments. It also formally abolished local elections and gave the responsibility of appointing local officials to the state governments (Shabbir Cheema and Ahmad Hussein, 1978).<sup>6</sup>

The issue arose again in recent years after the opposition Pakatan Rakyat coalition took control of the Penang and Selangor state governments (Rodan, 2018). Specifically, the Local Government Elections (Penang Island and Province Wellesley) Enactment 2012 sought to exempt Penang from Section 15 of the LGA, thereby allowing it to hold local government elections. A Federal Court ruling in 2014 overruled the decision, however, declaring that the Penang State government exceeded its jurisdiction in passing the enactment. The Selangor state government made similar overtures and explored mechanisms to democratise the selection process – including soliciting applications for local government positions – while not contravening the High Court’s decision. Voices from civil society, including Bersih and Aliran, simultaneously agitated to bring the issue back into the broader political discourse.

### **Malaysia’s Fourteenth General Election – and Beyond**

BN entered GE14 fully confident of victory, not least due to the fundamental pro-incumbent advantages conferred by the electoral process (Wong et al., 2010; Gomez, 2016; Ostwald, 2017b). That confidence was bolstered by the somewhat *ad hoc* nature of PH, which comprises former opposition stalwarts Parti Keadilan Rakyat (PKR) and the Democratic Action Party

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<sup>6</sup> It is noteworthy that federal control over local governments, including through the National Council for Local Government, has limited reach in the East Malaysian states of Sabah and Sarawak.

(DAP), as well as UMNO-clone party Parti Pribumi Bersatu Malaysia (Bersatu), PAS-splinter party Amanah, and East Malaysian Warisan. These strange bedfellows, representing different segments of society and ideological convictions, were united primarily by the shared objective of unseating BN.

To coordinate campaigning and allay fears of disunity, PH's leadership released the 150-page *Buku Harapan*, a political manifesto that articulated the coalition's objectives through a series of promises and pledges (Pakatan Harapan, 2018). The presence of key individuals from PKR and DAP in the coalition ensured that the issues of decentralisation and local government were included.<sup>7</sup> Promise 24 committed to 'revive the true spirit of federalism', noting that UMNO had 'plundered' the arrangement through excessive centralisation. To rectify this, 'the power of the states will be strengthened by decentralising suitable jurisdictions' and returning a greater share of tax revenue back to the states (Pakatan Harapan, 2018: 58). Promise 25 committed to 'strengthen[ing] the role and powers of the local authorities' by expanding their competences. Furthermore, the 'accountability [of local governments] to the local community will be improved' and the 'Local Government Act 1976 will be amended to ensure that this aspiration is realised' (Ibid.: 59).

While neither promise explicitly references local elections, the commitment to increase accountability through an amendment of the LGA was widely seen as an intention to reinstate the third vote. Key figures within PH were more explicit towards that end. PKR MP Maria Chin Abdullah, for example, promised to push for the return of local elections by tabling in parliament a private member's bill, thereby continuing the efforts she had made as a leader of Bersih prior to entering parliament. DAP MP Lim Lip Eng promised to return local elections to Kuala Lumpur, calling it one of the first priorities of DAP MPs from the former capital.

Hopes for a rapid implementation following PH's assumption of power, however, were dashed. The Minister for Housing and Local Government, Zuraida Kamaruddin, affirmed the intention to reinstate the third vote, but laid out a three-year target to allow for detailed studies of the matter and pass the requisite legal amendments. Among the logistical questions to be addressed are how local elections would be held, who would administer

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<sup>7</sup> See Khoo et al. (2009) for a discussion on the earlier position of PKR and the DAP on local elections.

them, who would be eligible to run, and whether any special provisions, including reservations for civil society, are needed. The minister further suggested that the new government would have to prioritise Malaysia's fiscal position before introducing the additional burden of costly local elections on already strained public budgets.

The obstacles do not end with legal reforms and costs. While PKR and DAP have long been proponents of the third vote, others within the PH coalition appear less enthusiastic. Notably, Mahathir himself has openly expressed reservations, citing concerns about racial tension as justification for delaying or outright preventing their return.<sup>8</sup> Mahathir's argument that geographical segregation would produce councils dominated by Chinese in urban areas and Malays in rural areas, and would thus exacerbate polarisation, is similar to the BN's long-standing position against local elections, and is shared by many within PAS. PAS's president Abdul Hadi Awang is reported as stating that local elections could result in a repeat of the deadly May 13 race riots of 1969. While it is difficult to reconcile these arguments with Malaysia's massive demographic changes during the last decades – through which urban areas have become highly multiracial and often have a strong Malay presence – the menace of ethnic violence looms large enough that references to it can still derail otherwise viable initiatives. Regardless, internal disagreements within PH may well be responsible for the manifesto's rather vague reference to 'strengthening local governments', as opposed to the concrete promise of restoring local elections from the earlier PKR and DAP manifestos.

There are also substantial questions about the political value of reinstating local elections. Clearly, support among key civil society groups is large, as evidenced by the strong advocacy efforts from, among others, the Petaling Jaya Coalition (MyPJ), the Penang Forum Coalition, and Selamatkan Kuala Lumpur in the months after GE14. Less clear is to what extent that enthusiasm extends throughout the electorate. Given the new governing coalition's precariousness both in terms of its internal stability and control over a state that was dominated by the BN for over half a century, PH has little appetite to expend political capital on reforms that many voters are not (yet) looking for. In short, the need for 'popular victories' may crowd out reforms that have clear benefits but are not prioritised by voters.

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<sup>8</sup> See: Joseph Kaos Jr, 'No-go for local council polls', *The Star Online*, 11 December 2018.



## **A Brief Glance at Support for Local Elections**

Much of what has been reported on local elections in Malaysia involves voices from the political elite and NGOs. This chapter reviews evidence from an original survey administered to 500 Malaysian voters shortly after GE14 to shed light on sentiments among the electorate. The survey was delivered online to a panel that, while not fully representative, included respondents from all of Malaysia's major areas, ethnic groups, and social strata. It closely followed published data on most major demographic observables, with two exceptions: the sample over-represented higher levels of educational attainment and had a higher proportion of stated PH voters, though it is unclear whether the latter was due to oversampling PH supporters or to respondents who voted BN professing support for PH after its GE14 victory.

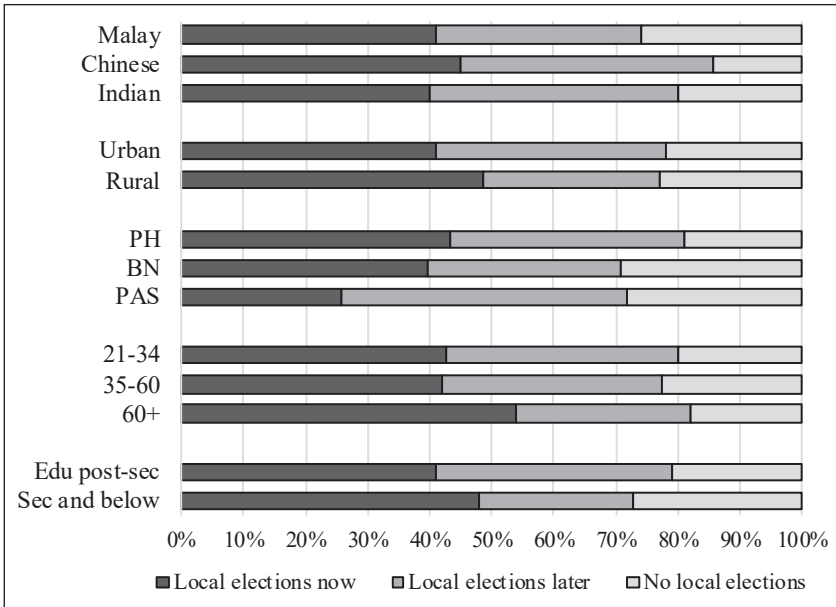
The survey began with a simple question about support for the re-instatement of local elections. In the question, respondents were reminded that Malaysia had local elections until 1965. They were then asked about bringing back local elections, specifically whether they should be brought back (1) now; (2) in the future, but not now; or (3) not at all, because they are inappropriate for Malaysia.<sup>9</sup>

In aggregate, approximately 43 per cent of respondents indicated support for the immediate return of local elections, with 36 per cent supporting their eventual return. Only 21 per cent indicated that local elections are not appropriate for Malaysia. For several reasons, however, these aggregate figures should be treated with some caution. First, the nature of the sample limits the inferences that can be drawn from these summary statistics. Second, and more importantly, the figures do not give any indication of the extent to which local elections are prioritised over other reforms or levels of government.

Fig. 1 shows responses disaggregated by potentially relevant categories. Comparing relative support levels in this way somewhat mitigates concerns about limitations of the sample and offers insights on assumptions about obstacles to re-instating local elections. The left-most portion of each bar (in dark grey) indicates the percentage of respondents who support immediate

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<sup>9</sup> A subset of respondents received an experimental treatment noting that racial tension was among the reasons given for not holding local elections. As this treatment was randomly assigned, I do not differentiate between treatment and non-treatment groups in reporting aggregate findings.



**Fig. 1.** Support for re-introduction of local elections disaggregated by potentially relevant categories

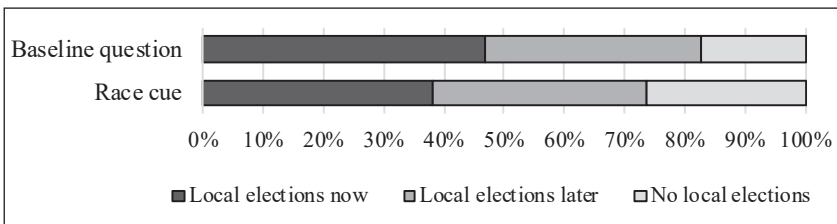
re-introduction; the middle portion (in medium grey) the percentage who support delayed re-introduction; and the rightmost portion (in light grey) the percentage who feel local elections are not appropriate for Malaysia.

Several basic conclusions emerge from Fig. 1. Most importantly, support for the return of local elections appears more uniform across major categories than popular discourse suggests: while there is minor variation along ethnic, party affiliation, age, and educational attainment (post-secondary vs. secondary and below) categories, a clear majority of respondents in all subgroups support the return of local elections at some point. Perhaps unsurprisingly, support is marginally higher among ethnic Chinese than their Malay and Indian counterparts, though the gap is not sufficiently large to have practical implications. Geography, likewise, does not appear to be a significant factor. Party affiliation follows the anticipated distribution, though the gap between PH and BN supporters is negligible. Regarding age, support appears to be highest among the age group who may have some living memory of the third vote.

Malaysia has changed in fundamental ways since the deadly race riots of 1969. Despite this, many fear that the country remains distinctly vulnerable

to instability caused by racial friction. This fear is regularly exploited by some political actors and NGOs, and has the potential to halt progress on technically and theoretically sound reforms. The December 2018 anti-ICERD rally illustrates this well (Waikar, 2018). The statements by actors as diverse as PH's Mahathir Mohamad and PAS's Hadi Awang – who represent the government and the opposition – that local elections may aggravate racial polarisation underscores the potential vulnerability of the issue to those fears. To assess this proposition, a randomly selected subgroup of the respondents was shown a variant of the previous question that included a brief reference to fears that local elections may create tension between the races. Aside from the added race cue, the question was identical. This form of embedded experiment is frequently used to isolate the causal effect of a particular treatment, in this case the cue linking local elections with ethnic tension. Fig. 2 shows the results of this experiment. The 'Baseline question' illustrates responses to the baseline question that does not reference racial tensions, while the 'Race cue' line captures responses to the question with the embedded cue.

As is evident, the mere mention of a possible link between local elections and ethnic tension is enough to depress support for their return, though the effect is relatively modest in magnitude: support for the immediate return of local elections drops from 47 to 38 per cent, while the number who see local elections as inappropriate for Malaysia increases from 17 to 26 per cent. The treatment is highly statistically significant. The sample size is not large enough to make strong inferences on which social groupings are more or less vulnerable to changing their preferences based on the race cue. Nonetheless, the clear vulnerability of the issue to fears of racial tensions suggests that a campaign against it infused with divisive racial and religious rhetoric may significantly depress public support for the re-introduction of the third vote.



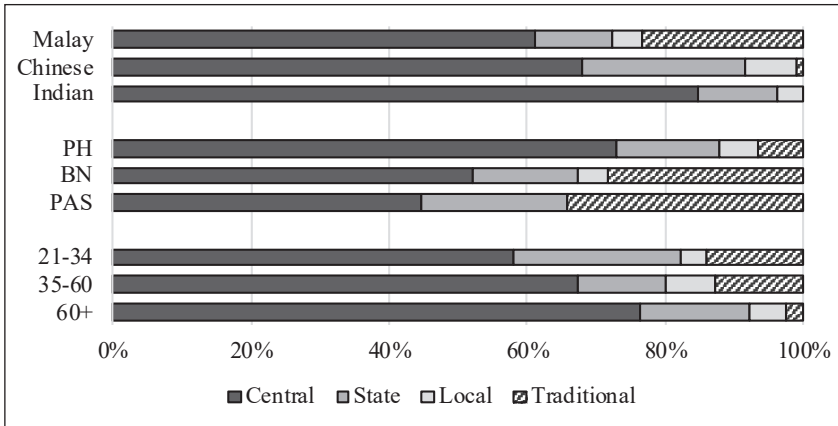
**Fig. 2.** Support for re-introduction of local elections disaggregated by baseline question and experimental variant that references a potential link between local elections and ethnic tension

The categories used in Fig. 1 comprised overlapping attributes that may be individually correlated with support for local elections. This may obscure relevant intra-group variation. An ordered logit regression provides insights on the independent effects of numerous respondent attributes, thereby giving a more comprehensive and robust understanding of variations in support for local elections.<sup>10</sup> In the interest of space and accessibility, the detailed findings are not shown here. The findings can be summarised as follows. First, a full range of demographic attributes – including household income, rural/urban residence, heterogeneity of local neighbourhood, and educational attainment – are not statistically significant, indicating that these factors do not strongly predict support for the return of local elections. Second, even when controlling for those and other attributes, ethnic Chinese maintain higher levels of support for local elections than their Malay and Indian counterparts. Third, there is no clear difference between PH and BN supporters after controlling for other attributes, though PAS voters are significantly less supportive of local elections. Fourth, a number of proxies for political preferences are *ceteris paribus* positively correlated with support for local elections: specifically, respondents who prefer less policy differentiation along racial lines are more supportive of local elections, even after controlling for all other factors. Finally, the race cue that mentions a potential link between local elections and racial tension remains highly significant and a stronger predictor than any other single attribute.

A major limitation of asking the electorate about support for the return of local elections is that the response provides no insights on preferred distribution of power across the three tiers of government. In other words, an individual could be in favour of empowering local governments and reinstating the third vote, but still prefer that the federal government maintain its current level of dominance over the lower tiers. To assess this, respondents were asked about their preferred distribution of power across the federal level, state level, local level, or traditional institutions like the monarchies. Fig. 3 shows the responses, again disaggregated by potentially relevant categories. The leftmost segment (in dark grey) denotes support for a powerful prime minister and Cabinet, explicitly noting that this comes at the expense of state and local governments; the next segment (in medium grey) denotes support for strengthening state governments; the

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<sup>10</sup> I opt for an ordered logit model due to the ordinal nature of the dependent variable. A simple ordinary least squares regression provides substantively similar results. Please contact me for detailed findings.



**Fig. 3.** Preferences for the relative distribution of power across Malaysia's three tiers of government and traditional institutions

third segment (in light grey) denotes support for strengthening the local tier of government; and the final segment (with hashes) denotes support for strengthening traditional institutions like the monarchies.

Across nearly all categories, there is a clear preference for a strong prime minister and Cabinet relative to subnational tiers of government. The high level of support among PH supporters is especially striking: one would have expected a very different distribution prior to GE14, with a large portion of respondents supporting stronger state and local governments. Yet having taken the reins of power, over three-quarters of PH supporters now endorse a strong prime minister, presumably with the belief that reinvigorating the economy and fixing the institutional decay brought about by BN's excesses require a powerful and decisive leader. Where there is support for empowering subnational institutions, relatively little of it is directed at the local tier.

## Conclusion

Decentralisation, including the return of local elections, consistently featured among the top priorities of PKR and DAP prior to GE14. There has been little urgency to implement these reforms, however, in the immediate aftermath of GE14. While the responsible ministry remains open to the eventual return of local elections, it has been ambiguous about details and gave an initial three-year timeline. This was met by critical reactions

from segments of civil society and the electorate who believe strongly in the advantages of empowering subnational tiers of government, especially for populations who were marginalised under the highly centralised BN government.

On the technical front, there are reasons to opt for a measured approach to implementation. After nearly fifty years without local elections, few voters have experience with them and key logistical questions about their implementation remain unresolved. More importantly, the sequencing of devolving power is critical. Decades of centralisation have left Malaysia with relatively weak subnational tiers. Deprived of resources and autonomy, the states have managed to govern in part through their *de facto* control of local governments, which significantly expands their ability to carry out their obligations. The return of local elections will restore autonomy to the local tier, thereby partially severing that linkage. If that occurs before the states are empowered through other decentralisation measures, Malaysia risks exacerbating the already serious problem of the ‘missing middle’ (Hutchinson, 2017), in which the states lack the capacity to effectively monitor and coordinate local level activities. Indonesia’s experience with rapid decentralisation following the fall of Suharto provides a ready example of the governance costs that that can entail (Ostwald et al., 2016).

Separate from the technical considerations, there are also clear political reasons for caution. PH was formed with the primary objective of unseating Najib and the BN. Having defeated the common enemy, the coalition of convenience now must identify and converge around other shared objectives. Of these, stimulating economic growth is the least contentious. There appears to be far less consensus around decentralisation, especially as it entails producing losers at the federal level that must cede power in order to strengthen the subnational tiers. On a more personal level, Mahathir has publicly stated his reservations about local elections. Many also remember him as the architect of centralisation during the 1980s and 1990s. Few within the new government will want to force this issue before the internal political landscape becomes more favourable. This is compounded by the perceived linkage between local elections and racial tensions, which has grown all the more sensitive in light of UMNO and PAS appearing to base much of their post-GE14 political strategy on ethno-religious agitation.

If the political risks of pressing for local elections are high in the immediate post-GE14 period, the political pay-offs appear low. Curtailing the power of the Prime Minister’s Department and the UMNO elite who inhabited it was of paramount importance to many opposition voters prior

to GE14. Decentralisation offered a way to restore autonomy to areas of the subnational government that the BN could not win. But with a different, and presumably more friendly, coalition now controlling the federal government – notwithstanding that many names remain unchanged – such structural demands are overshadowed by the desire for economic growth and simple livelihood improvements. Many PH supporters may, in fact, find themselves supporting decisive top-down leadership under the assumption that it improves the prospects of those ends being realised.

Assuming PH remains in power, Malaysia may well eventually bring back the third vote and implement meaningful decentralisation reforms. If that occurs, it is also quite likely that some of the theoretically predicted benefits will accrue to Malaysians, especially to those marginalised communities who were neglected by the previous government. But, as with so many initiatives, what appears to be an ideal solution in the abstract proves to be complex and replete with trade-offs at the moment of implementation. Empowering local governments is no exception to this, making PH's delays less an obvious betrayal of campaign promises and more a reflection of the complexities of actually governing.

### Acknowledgements

I thank Stanley Chia, Alycia Steven, Kai Sheng Tan, and Melissa Tan for their excellent research support, as well as the anonymous reviewer for the constructive suggestions.

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